The Deadly Dozen:
12 Motorcycle Safety Myths and Misconceptions

When science meets urban legend and imperfect logic, some of the "facts" motorcyclists think they "know“
about motorcycle safety, crashes, and riding turn out to be dangerous myths and misconceptions.

Motorcyclists should be extremely cautious about what they hear about motorcycle safety. Some of it may be dangerously wrong.

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Get a group of motorcyclists talking about crashes and safety, and you will almost certainly hear some of them—popular misconceptions, incorrect assumptions, urban legends, and intuitive explanations about motorcycle safety that turn out to be wrong when you actually check out the facts.

The problem is that believing these misconceptions can increase your chances of being involved in an accident or getting hurt when you do crash.

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Maybe you know the difference when you hear it, but maybe you have heard some myths repeated so often or by people whose expertise you respect that you think they are actually true. Unfortunately, there are a lot of motorcyclists who do believe them. We thought that some of these fallacies should be brought out into the light of day so that riders have the right information upon which to make informed riding-safety decisions. We also hope it will keep more motorcyclists from repeating such misconceptions to riders who turn to them for advice.

These are the Deadly Dozen, the motorcycle safety myths and urban legends ones that we hear most frequently.

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Myth 1: Other Drivers Don't Care About Motorcyclists

It may seem hard to believe at times, but other drivers almost never actually want to hit you. Most of those near-misses come about because they don't always know you are there, even when you are right in front of them, seemingly in plain view. You can be obscured or completely hidden by glare, by other things on or along the road, by the cars roof pillars, the handicap hangtag, or by other traffic. Of course, not all drivers "think motorcycles" and make the effort to look that extra bit harder to see if there might be a motorcyclist hidden by that obscuration or in their blind spot.

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Myth 1: Continued

Instead of assuming that they will ignore you even when they see you, you should help make it easier for drivers to spot you, especially as the population ages and more drivers have greater difficulty in picking you out. To overcome the fact that you might be hard to see and harder to notice, wear bright colors, especially on your helmet and jacket. Run your high beam during the day. Think about things that can hide you and your bike from other drivers, things that can be as common as the sun behind you, the car ahead in the next lane, or a couple of roadside poles that line up on the driver's line of sight toward you. Make an effort to ride in or move to a location where drivers with potentially conflicting courses can see you before they stray your way.

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Myth 2: Loud Pipes Save Lives

Yeah, there are a few situations—like where you are right next to a driver with his window down who is about the to change lanes—where full-time noise-makers might help a driver notice you, but all that noise directed rearward doesn't do much in the most common and much more dangerous conflict where a car turns in front of you. Maybe it's the fatigue caused by the noise, maybe it's the attitudes of riders who insist on making annoying noise, or perhaps loud bikes annoy enough drivers to make them aggressive. Whatever the reason, the research shows that bikes with modified exhaust systems crash more frequently than those with stock pipes. If you really want to save lives, turn to a loud jacket or a bright helmet color, which have been proven to do the job. Or install a louder horn. Otherwise, just shut up.

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Myth 3: Motorcycle Helmets Break Necks

It seems logical—you put more weight out there on the end of your neck and when you get thrown off the bike, that extra weight will create more pendulum force on your neck. Turns out, it doesn't work that way. In fact, the energy-absorbing qualities of a DOT motorcycle helmet also absorb the energy that breaks riders' necks in impacts. Studies show that helmeted motorcyclists actually suffer *fewer* neck injuries when they crash compared to riders who crash without helmets.

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lyth 4: Helmets Block Your Ability to See or Hear Dang

The thing you learn when you dig into the research is that motorcycle riders who use helmets crash less frequently than those who don't. Maybe that happens because motorcyclists who decide to wear helmets have a better or more realistic attitude about riding. Maybe it's because putting on a helmet is a reminder that what you are about to do can be dangerous and the act of accepting protection puts you in the right mindset. Maybe it's because a helmet provides eye protection and cuts down wind noise so you can actually see and hear better. Maybe its because, by cutting wind pressure and noise, a helmet reduces fatigue. Whatever the reasons, wearing a helmet clearly does not increase a motorcyclist's risk of having an accident and wearing one correlates to reduced likelihood of an accident.

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Myth 5: A Helmet Won't Help in Most Crashes

People look at the seemingly low impact speeds used in motorcycle-helmet testing and assume that if you are going faster than that, the helmet will no longer be up to the job. That ignores a few critical facts:

Most accidents happen at relatively low speeds.

Most of the impact energy is usually vertical—the distance your head falls until it hits.

Helmets (or at least helmets that meet DOT standards) perform spectacular life-saving feats at impact speeds far above those used in testing.

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Myth 5: Continued

When a helmeted rider suffers a fatal head injury, it frequently doesn't matter, because, to hit hard enough to sustain that fatal injury, he sustained multiple additional fatal injuries to other parts of his body. In other words, the fact that the helmet didn't prevent the head injury was of no consequence.

The numbers clearly say that riders using DOT helmets simply survive crashes more successfully than those without them.

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Myth 6: A Helmet Will Leave You Brain Damaged in a Crash When You Would Have Simply Died

Of course that's possible—your helmet attenuates the impact energy enough to keep the injury from being fatal but not enough to keep all of your eggs from getting scrambled. However, that's rare, and if you hit that hard, you are likely to get killed by some other injury. It's actually the un-helmeted rider who is likely to cross from animal to vegetable kingdom, and often from a relatively minor impact that would have damaged nothing but his ego if he'd been wearing a DOT helmet.

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Myth 7: A Skilled Rider Should Be Able to Handle Almost Any Situation

The sharpest, most skilled motorcyclist in the world isn't going to be up to the task when a car turns or pulls out in front of him a short distance ahead and stops directly in his path broadside. Believing that your superior skills will keep you of trouble is a pipe dream, even if they are as good as you think. No matter how skilled you are, it's better to ride to avoid situations that can turn ugly. Slow down, scan farther ahead, and think strategically. And dress for the crash.

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Myth 8: If You Are Going to Crash, Lay It Down

I suspect this line was developed by riders to explain why they ended up flat-side-down while trying to avoid a crash. They over-braked or otherwise lost control, then tried to explain the crash away as intentional and tried to make it sound like it wasn't a crash at all. Maybe motorcycle brakes once were so bad that you could stop better off your bike while sliding or tumbling. If so, that hasn't been true for decades. You can scrub off much more speed before and there be going slower at impact with effective braking than you will sliding down the road on your butt. And if you are still on the bike, you might get thrown over the car you collide with, avoiding an impact with your body.

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Myth 8: Continued

If you slide into a car while you are on the ground, you either have a hard stop against it or end up wedged under it. Remember that the phrase "I laid 'er down to avoid a crash" is an oxymoron, often repeated by some other kind of moron.

If you are going to ride a motorcycle in the near future, no beer is enough beer.

The only events where being on the ground *might* leave you better off are: 1) on an elevated roadway where going over the guardrail will cause you to fall a long way, or 2) in that situation you see occasionally in movies, where the motorcyclist slides under a semi trailer without touching it. That's a good trick if the truck is moving.

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Myth 9: One Beer Won't Hurt

Maybe not while you are drinking it, but if you get on your motorcycle after that, the effects of a single beer can get you hurt for life. No matter how unaffected you are sure you are, all the studies say differently. You increase your risk to yourself and to others when you drink and hit the road. Also, as you age, your metabolism slows down, and those "couple of drinks" you had last night may still be affecting you when you hit the road the next morning.

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lyth 10: It's Better to Stay in Your Lane than Split Lan

In most parts of the world, motorcycles split lanes all the time, everywhere traffic is heavy. Here in the U.S., people often act as if lane-splitting is insane. But when someone actually studied it in the only place in the U.S. where it's legal (California), they discovered it's actually slightly safer than staying in the lane in heavy, slow-moving traffic. Still many motorcyclists berate others who do it, when they should in fact be endorsing it.

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yth 11: I'm Safer on the Street than on an Interstate

The thinking here must be that slower is safer, but that's only really true after the accident begins. Controlled-access roadways are inherently safer because all the traffic is going the same way, and there are no side streets from which someone can pop into your path, no pedestrians, and, often, less roadside "furniture" to hit if you depart the roadway. Running down the road at 70 mph side-by-sidewall with the whirling wheels of a semi may feel hairy, but you are actually safer than at half that speed on a city street or even a country road.

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Myth 12: A Skilled Rider Can Stop Better with Conventional Brakes than with Anti-Lock

- Extensive testing has thoroughly disproven this popular notion. Even on clean, dry, flat pavement, skilled, experienced riders (who did hundreds of panic stops for the testing on outrigger-equipped motorcycles) stopped in less distance with anti-lock brakes (ABS) than with conventional or linked braking systems. Though the tests didn't include samples on surfaces with slick, dirty or wet spots, ABS certainly would have performed even better under those conditions while eliminating much of the risk of crashing.
- The other cool thing about ABS on a motorcycle is that allows you to safely practice panic stops without risking a crash caused by lock-up.
- Anyway, the next time someone tells you that they had to "lay it down" or that green bikes crash more than purple ones, you can nod and snicker internally or challenge them. Just don't base your own riding choices on what other people assume unless their is some solid science to back it up.

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